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Clearing the Decks for Dominant Culture: Some First Principles for a Contemporary Art Education

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The promotion by art education of high culture is based upon the high-culture critique of society which condemns the dominant, popular culture with which students are largely engaged. The assumptions on which this critique is based do not resist analysis and need to be displaced if art education is to become a serious critic of students' cultural preferences. Pejorative stratifications of culture need to be reformulated as categories of cultural pluralism, and an insider's perspective on dominant culture adopted. Instead of a romantic, individualistic model of cultural production, a collaborative and institutional model of production must be employed. Disdain for the users of dominant culture¹ must be replaced by regard for the way students handle the conditions of their existence. A regressive view of cultural history should be exposed as a myth, and pessimism about the future displaced by a willingness to engage in social struggle. A creator orientation toward culture must be superseded by a user orientation. Finally, the assertion of common-sense, self-evident, ideal standards must give way to an acknowledgment that standards are historically conditioned, ideological, and subject to argument.

Outside the art room students watch television, read comics, go to the movies, play videos; inside the art room they draw, paint and sculpt, and learn about what they are told is great art. One culture is dominant; it is highly popular and closely linked to the major economic arrangements of society. The other is high culture. For many art educators, the division between the two cultures is maintained by deeply held assumptions about their respective natures. For art educators to engage seriously with the cultural forms with which most of their students are most familiar and most value, these assumptions need to be challenged and displaced.

In this paper I will demonstrate that the assumptions upon which custodians of high culture dismiss and condemn dominant culture fail to resist analysis. In doing so, first principles will be proposed toward a socially responsible engagement with dominant culture.

The Literature

It is a characteristic of art educational literature that instead of a litany denouncing dominant culture, there is a general absence of comment. Most art educators appear to have assumed that dominant culture is so antithetical to their aims that comment is unnecessary. Those who have denounced dominant culture (Eisner, 1979; Feldman, 1982; Kaufman, 1966; Smith, 1986) have derived their critique not from aesthetic philosophy, which is primarily concerned

¹Dominant culture refers to popular culture or mass-media culture. It is the most prevalent form of culture and it is the most closely tied to dominant forms of economic arrangement.

with questions specific to fine art, but from traditions of thought which have taken the concept of culture as central to their critique. Although it is a tradition largely of literary critics, unlike aesthetic philosophy it has not been centrally concerned with a specific cultural form. Its focus has been the state of society. Included are the English literary humanists (both liberal and conservative), their North American counterparts, and the Frankfurt School Marxists. These critics share a view of culture as a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development, as well as the works and practices of intellectual, and especially artistic, activity which represent and sustain such development (Williams, 1958). This concept of culture is broader than the usual modern concept and practice of fine art, but closely associated with it. Culture is seen "as a court of human appeal. . . set over the process of a practical social judgement" yet also "a mitigating and rallying alternative" (p. xviii), a moral defense in the face of modern society. In the words of its single most influential proponent, Matthew Arnold (1869/1891), its aim is "a harmonious expansion of human nature" through "the study and pursuit of perfection" (pp. 10, 7).

The displacement of this tradition has come from many sources. The arguments offered here are primarily indebted to Cultural Studies as developed in England, which is a network of disciplines including literary criticism, media studies, and semiotics.

First Principles and Old Assumptions

Categories of Culture Are Descriptions, Not Evaluations

Categorizing culture has long been done as if there existed a hierarchy of levels, where dominant, popular culture has been placed lower than alleged real, good, or authentic culture. Categorizing culture has meant stratification. Avant-garde art has been contrasted with "kitsch" or "ersatz culture" (Greenberg, 1973). Others have used a spatial metaphor, separating high from low as in "high-brow" (Browne, 1973), often with intermediary categories such as "midcult" (Macdonald, 1952) or "the third stream" (Cawelti, 1976).

While useful as qualified descriptions of cultural pluralism (Gans, 1974), it is an unwarranted leap from classifying *what* different people value to what they *should* value. Further, stratifications simplify the frequent overlap and interchange between cultural products and exaggerate differences (Gans, 1974). They equally tend to ignore the continual reassessment of what comprises high culture (Williams, 1961/1965).

In attacking dominant culture, stratifications of taste ignore the life lived by different users of culture. By contrast, categorizing culture is necessarily a function of classes as political factions and of groups of people identified with income, occupation, and education; with religious affiliation; ethnic or racial background; regional origin; place of residence; gender; personal position within a social group; and age. All such classes are sites of contemporary cultural analysis (e.g., Chambers, 1986; Hebdige, 1988; Turner, 1988).

Understanding Culture Requires an Insider's Perspective

Understanding dominant culture necessitates an insider's view. This is true of any culture, yet it is a characteristic of the high-culture critique of dominant culture that it is offered by outsiders. How else to explain the condemnation of dominant culture as undifferentiated, standardized, and impersonal (e.g., Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1972; Macdonald, 1952).

As Gans (1974) writes, however, "there are as many varieties of rock as of baroque chamber music. . . different schools in high culture are equivalent to

the different formulas in popular culture, for both represent widely accepted solutions to a given problem" (p. 22). All cultural products are necessarily composed of conventions and inventions. In high culture, innovation is celebrated; in popular culture, it is taken for granted (p. 23). For scholars, variation may have been more apparent among high-cultural products because high culture received scholarly examination (p. 22), but now that popular culture is also subject to serious scrutiny, extensive variation in popular fare as well as extremely complex relations between it and its audiences have become apparent. For example, the rock star Madonna appears to be understood by her different fans in distinctively different ways (Turner, 1988). As Chambers (1986) writes, to recognize ourselves "means living inside the [cultural] signs. It means engaging in the contradictory pleasures of. . .inhabiting the signs of the contemporary world" (p. 212).

Cultural Production Is Profoundly Social

Making culture is a social enterprise, involving the use of codes and conventions which evolve over time in complex ways. To regard such codes and conventions as invented by specific individuals at specific times and places is a gross oversimplification (Williams, 1981). It is just this simplification that is assumed by high-culture critics. They assume the optimal model for cultural production to be an autonomous individual, standing at a distance from society, who selects, transforms, or produces separable objects like paintings or books. Even when discussing performance arts—which are manifestly collective—the critics emphasize the "producer" or "author," following the conditions of production in print and paint media (p. 112). From this perspective, the production of dominant culture has been attacked as group concoction (Sontag, 1973, p. 29), and as "a blatant cash investment" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1972, p. 124) where "exchange value counts not truth value" (Marcuse, 1964, p. 57). It is also seen as imposed by established authority from above and even "paving the way for totalitarianism" (Rosenburg, 1957, p. 9).

These observations correctly draw attention to the position of the cultural producer in new cultural technologies—typically, the salaried professional specialist who produces planned, saleable goods. When examined historically, however, many precedents for the production of dominant culture today have evidently been set by high-cultural production in the past. Elizabethan drama, so highly prized by high-culture critics (Eagleton, 1983), has in both its collaborative internal formation and relations with established authority close parallels with television production (Esslin, 1975). Throughout history most artists have been regarded by authorities as an integral, if minor, part of the general social organization.

Market conditions sufficiently flexible to allow producers freedom to direct their own work represent only one of the numerous productive arrangements under which artists have worked to produce high culture (Williams, 1981, pp. 36-56). The idea of the cultural producer as a creative individual is no more than "theoreticist" (p. 34), an extension and generalization of the problems, preoccupations, and observations of our particular cultural period. The belief that individual expression must be different might be regarded as "the avant-garde fallacy"; it ignores the unspectacular but solid achievements of ordinary people.

Moreover, the view of dominant culture as cynically organized for financial gain ignores the ambiguous overt goals of media organizations. It underplays

the room for maneuver possessed by progressive individuals and groups in exploiting the overt need to be seen to serve the public. Minority content may fill the need for overproduction and a degree of risk taking is essential for the future of media organizations (McQuail, 1987).

From a neo-Marxist position, consideration of cultural production should always be in terms of the extent to which producers retain autonomy from ruling ideas, and the extent to which autonomy is allowed (Williams, 1981, pp. 189-193). And as Enzenberger (1974) writes, "Consciousness, however false. . . cannot be industrially produced. It is a 'social product made up by people: its origin is the dialogue. No industrial process can replace the people who generate it' " (pp. 4-5).

Users of Dominant Culture Actively Discriminate

Research on mass-culture use is today premised on the resilience and self-protective capacity of individuals, groups, and whole societies to deal in complex, negotiable, and oppositional ways with media content (McQuail, 1987). Such respect for ordinary users of dominant culture is in marked contrast to the disdain with which they have long been held by custodians of high culture. Arnold (1869/1891) regarded most people as barbarians and Philistines. The majority were seen as morally corrupt (Eliot, 1948), deceived masses of one-dimensional persons (Marcuse, 1964).

Macdonald (1952) regarded the users of dominant culture as having no more independence than an iron filing has in the proximity of a magnet. In varying degrees, his view was shared by students of mass media, particularly in North America. To study the role of the media in society was to study its direct effects on consumers. The finding of this voluminous research is that no mechanical, stimulus-response relationship exists. Research now focuses on how audiences use the media to their own ends (McQuail, 1987). "Hollywood films, advertising images, packaging, clothes and music—offers a rich iconography. . . which can be assembled and re-assembled by different groups in a literally limitless number of combinations" (Hebdige, 1988, p. 74).

Researchers view the media as only one, not clearly demarcated influence among other influences, as constitutive of social meanings and values rather than a reflection of them, "as providing constructions of what society is like, the nature of its norms, and what behaviours are appropriate in various circumstances" (Lowery & DeFluer, 1988, p. 441). As such, media messages can be seen to have many purposes with much accompanying ambiguity of meaning and significant, unresolved contradictions and tensions. Williams (1958) puts the issue well: "To other people we are also masses. . . . There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses" (p. 300).

Far from being manipulative, dominant culture should be viewed as embodying collective myths, dreams, and age-old ways of signifying. Long-running television series, for example, have been compared to folk epics. Because the makers of these series are motivated to succeed, the longer a series runs the more it becomes "the product of the imagination, desires, fears, and dreams of the audience" (Esslin, 1975, p. 194). The implication is that popular culture serves basic psychic needs: Among numerous, available stimuli, people choose media fare which best serves their particular needs.

Carey (1989) catches the essence of this perspective by referring to mass communications, not as a transmission, but a ritual: "The creation, representation, and celebration of shared even if illusory beliefs. . . [A] ritual view centres

on the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality" (p. 43).

Dominant Culture Content Is Age Old

With headlines like *Woman Raped by Dog* or *My Child was Born an Octopus*, few forms of dominant culture could be more dissimilar from high-culture sensitivities than yellow newspapers. Yet they stand in a long, if inglorious tradition, at least as old as the ballads and broadsheets of Regency England. The crude language, sensational stories, and details of scandal are strikingly similar (Golby & Purdue, 1984, p. 83). This is but one example where, while a restricted tradition is now highly visible, the content of dominant culture is of long standing.

High-culture critics, however, assume a regressive and pessimistic view of history. Present conditions are judged to be a decline from circumstances now past which were more facilitative of real culture. For Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1972), better conditions were to be found in pre-Fascist Europe (p. 132); for Marcuse (1964), in a pretechnological 19th century (pp. 58-59); for Eliot, in the old American South (Eagleton, 1983, p. 38); and for Macdonald (1952), in the America prior to the Civil War (pp. 34-35). Dominant culture is damned as having "plumbed the abysses of vulgarity and falsehood unknown in the discoverable past" (Greenburg, 1973, p. 28).

Invariably, critics contrast their mass, atomized, technological society with small, organic, rural communities with their inherited work skills, continuity between work and leisure, and the generation of folk culture (Williams, 1958, pp. 259-264). The point of loss varies considerably: "If there is one thing certain about the organic community it is that it has always gone" (p. 259). In contemporary writing it is usually identified with the rural 18th century, though for writers in the 18th century it had already passed (pp. 259-260), and indeed its regression can be traced to classical times (Williams, 1973, p. 1).

No matter when the organic society is seen to have flourished by high-culture critics, small, rural communities and their folk culture are idealized. Excluded are the poverty, petty tyranny, hunger, disease, ignorance, frustrated intelligence, and pathology which were characteristic ingredients of preindustrial rural life (Williams, 1958, p. 260).

Dominant culture is viewed by high-culture critics as something new in history (e.g., Leavis, 1930, pp. 6-7; Macdonald, 1952, p. 61-62). This perception rightly points to the rapid growth of popular forms following industrialization. Yet it ignores essential continuities between popular forms in preindustrial and postindustrial societies, and even prior to printing as, for example, Benko (1980) demonstrates in Schroeder's anthology, *5000 Years of Popular Culture*. Benko argues that the Apocryphal New Testament literature, which he describes as "alleged miracles which border on the absurd" (p. 179), was produced as much for entertainment as education and constituted the Sunday afternoon reading matter of the early Christians.

Thus, the argument rejecting a regressive view of history returns to a consideration of the gratification of perennial needs. These needs include ego identification, the projection of repressed desire, eroticism, and the primordial wish for pleasurable looking which includes voyeurism, but also a general curiosity to penetrate others' lives (Mulvey, 1975). It also includes a delight in the frivolous and a refusal to take things seriously (Golby & Purdue, 1984). And as noted earlier, there are numerous links to be made between older and more recent

cultural forms in terms of shared myths and dreams.

A User-Orientation Is Essential

Gans (1974) describes high culture as creator oriented and popular culture as user oriented (pp. 25, 62-63). While for high-culture critics, culture exists primarily for the sake of those who produce it, the audience for dominant culture is chiefly interested in being satisfied with the product, not the process. Of literary critics, Williams (1958) writes:

To the highly literate person there is always a temptation to assume that reading plays as large a part in the lives of most people as it does in his own. But if he compares his own kind of reading with the reading matter that is most widely distributed, he is not really comparing levels of culture. He is, in fact, comparing what is produced for people for whom it is at best minor. (p. 308)

High-culture critics who are influenced intellectually and emotionally by the cultural products they engage with are led to believe that others must be equally influenced by the culture they consume. Noting the violent, sentimental, escapist nature of much popular culture, they assume that its audience is influenced to be violent, sentimental, and to disregard reality. As noted earlier, the media is but one element of social life which is used by its public in varying, negotiable, and disbelieving ways. To regard disdainfully people who enjoy violent, sentimental, and escapist fare as if they were deficient in discernment is to ignore their lived experience (of which such enjoyment is a part) and to judge them by criteria inappropriate to their lived experience. Such disdain, Williams (1958) suggests, is like the assumption made by reformers that farm laborers and village craftspeople were uneducated because they could not read (p. 309).

Adopting a user orientation follows from adopting an insider's position. Adopting such positions teaches us that the resistance of dominant culture to the serious and rational, its celebration of the anarchic and sensational, and its maintenance of stereotypes are rooted in people's conditions of existence. Attacking dominant culture without due regard to the lives of its audience is irrelevant.

Standards Vary Over Time and Are Socially Engaged

Judgements of value are always subject to the political and social context in which they are made. They are invariably engaged within a network of political and social pressures and processes, always ideological in the sense that they serve interests. As sketched below, even the very ideas of high culture and fine art evolved as a response and contribution to political and social movements.

High-culture critics, however, assert that standards are self-evident and time honored. Instead of standards being seen as an inseparable part of maneuvers and tactics constantly in tension, we are offered stable ideals. And instead of argument, we are offered appeals to the good and moral sense of the reader. Leavis (1930), for example, writing in one of the most influential texts of the critique, feels able to say, "I do not suppose myself to have produced a tight definition, but the account, I think will be recognized as adequate by anyone who is likely to read this pamphlet" (p. 5).

It is a commonplace among Marxist critics that there is nothing so ideological as common sense because ideology grounds itself in common sense. And despite its assertion to the contrary, this critique is ideological. It is offered as arising from the way things are, as outside history, unchangeable, natural, and with its premises disguised as known facts. Repressing any recognition of its

own historical conditioning, it is presented as unproblematic, neither premised nor conditional.

Historical studies of the high-culture critique reveal that its invocation of a fixed set of cultural standards has from its origins been deeply engaged, indeed highly partisan in social and political struggle (Gans, 1974; Johnson, 1979; Laing, 1978; Williams, 1958). Whether the critique is offered by English literary critics, their North American counterparts, or the Frankfurt School Marxist, the story is the same. Three interrelated themes emerge: the gradual marginalization of high-culture values as the basis for examining society; the gradual marginalization of high-culture critics from centers of power and influence; and the reactionary, conservative, antidemocratic positions adopted by both politically progressive and conservative critics. Williams (1958), for example, begins his history of the critique with Edmund Burke's condemnation of both the call for democracy and the beginnings of the industrial revolution. Yet as Williams shows (chap. 1), Burke is able to identify the upholders of traditional standards with the existing state, albeit somewhat idealized. By the middle of the 19th century, Matthew Arnold (1869/1891) proposes that only a classless remnant is able to uphold standards. Arnold is optimistic about social progress, and his view of culture is broad, liberal, and visionary. Yet it is linked to a reactionary political agenda. His book, *Culture and Anarchy*, the single most influential text of the high-culture critique, was written in direct response to a riot which occurred in London's Hyde Park after police charged into a demonstration that was calling for a widened franchise. Culture, for Arnold, was a means to circumvent social revolution. By 1930, F. R. Leavis feels unable to propose anything so splendidly speculative, sees no hope for a better future, and limits the upholders of standards to a small literary minority. Twenty years later T. S. Eliot (1948) develops a critique that is nothing short of an authoritarian, fantastical mythology, utterly unrelated to social realities. Perhaps the regressive view of history proposed by high-culture critics is merely a projection of their own declining fortunes.

In sum, the history of high-culture criticism demonstrates that cultural products and their judgement are alike in being politically and socially engaged. And as an inseparable part of political manoeuvres and social movements, they are subject to continual revision. As Williams (1977) argues, "The argument about values is in the *variable* encounters of intentions and response in specific situations" (p. 157).

Cultural standards are the product of argument as much as agreement, formed through discourse, always in tension between groups of people. They are created through an active practice whose meaning relates to other social and political practices. Conceived as such, genuine encounter with dominant culture is possible. Rejecting ideal standards and regarding standards as subject to argument and revision enables us to become, of dominant culture, its serious critics.

Conclusion

As long ago as 1958, Williams concluded his history of the high-culture critique by saying "The next step in thinking on these matters must be in a very different direction" (p. 243). It is high time that art education took a very different direction. Standing aloof and on the outside, with a romantic, individualistic model of cultural production, disdaining students for their tastes, believing that dominant culture represents a social decline, committed to a pro-

ducer orientation, and, finally, asserting self-evident, time-honored standards, art educators ensure that their practice remains peripheral for the great majority of students. If art education continues to be offered as a highly conservative, defensive reaction to dominant culture, it is precluded from making positive contributions. But to seek an insider's experience, with a collaborative model of production, to respect students for how they cope with the conditions imposed upon them, to acknowledge the perennial nature of dominant-culture content, and to recognize the changing political and social contexts in which cultural standards are established, maintained, and revised are first principles for a socially relevant art education. Such an art education would both earn the right and possess the potential to contribute critically to the meanings, values, and beliefs students form with dominant culture.

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